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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000890

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: AUGUST 15 RECAP: AWAMI LEAGUE OBSERVANCE OF SHEIKH  
MUJIB'S DEATH ANNIVERSARY OUTSHINES BNP CELEBRATIONS OF  
BEGUM ZIA'S BIRTHDAY

Classified By: ADCM Gary Mignano. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY  
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11. (C) Strengthened by the Caretaker Government's last minute decision to declare the day a "National Day of Mourning," on August 15 the Awami League organized a very successful nationwide program to observe the 33rd anniversary of former Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination. Awami League leaders and supporters took advantage of this opportunity to circumvent the restrictions on political activity related to the ongoing State of Emergency. For its part, the BNP was less successful in its attempts to celebrate imprisoned former Prime Minister and BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia's August 15 birthday. The August 15 celebrations serve as a barometer for the current conditions of the two major political parties as elections approach.

Awami League Commemorates of Mujib's Assassination  
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12. (U) On August 15, Bangladesh marked the 33rd anniversary of the 1975 military coup which resulted in the assassination of Awami League Prime Minister and "Father of the Nation" Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. On the eve of this year's anniversary, the Caretaker Government declared August 15 a "Day of National Mourning" and President Iajuddin Ahmed and Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed both traveled to Sheikh Mujib's gravesite to pay their respects. Local television channels broadcast discussion programs centered on Mujib's life and political career, and focused on his leadership of the Liberation Movement and the tragic end of his life.

13. (C) For its part, the Awami League took advantage of the opportunity to evade the normal restrictions on large scale public gatherings that has existed since the State of Emergency was imposed in January 2007. Awami League leaders and workers spent August 15 distributing food to the poor and giving speeches in honor of Mujib. Pol/Econ Counselor spent August 15 traveling around Bancharampur Upazilla in Chittagong Division along with the former Awami League Member of Parliament and other party officials from the area. The day-long barnstorming tour was an opportunity for the party officials and party workers to shed the restrictions on the size of local gatherings and to openly begin campaigning for the coming elections. At several locations, crowds well in excess of 200 people gathered, without the party having to seek prior police approval. Police were present at several venues, but did not bother the Awami League workers.

14. (C) The scene in Bancharampur was repeated throughout Bangladesh, including in Dhaka, where the Awami League's Central Leaders took the stage. Throughout the country, AL parliamentary candidates and local party officials took charge. The party spent between \$10,000 - 20,000 in each area, roughly equivalent to the Parliamentary constituencies.

In speaking with P/E Counselor, party workers and leaders were upbeat about their chances in the December elections. They all stuck to the familiar Awami League script calling for a lifting of the State of Emergency and postponement of Upazilla elections. They also looked eagerly forward to the return of their Leader, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who is currently in the United States.

#### Birthday Party for BNP Leader More Subdued

15. (C) When Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leaders attempted to mark their founder, former President Zia Rahman's death anniversary in May, police disrupted their activities. On August 15, the BNP launched a half-hearted attempt to remind people that the day was also imprisoned former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's birthday. In Dhaka a group of several score BNP leaders marched on the special jail where Begum Zia remains incarcerated, but in other parts of the country the celebrations were subdued. One Awami League leader blasted the BNP and Khaleda Zia for continuing to claim that August 15 was the Begum's birthday--a controversial claim that AL supporters have always suspected was a disrespectful attempt to deflect attention from Sheikh Mujib's death anniversary.

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#### Comment

16. (C) The differences in their celebrations on August 15 reflect the different status of the two major parties with four months remaining until elections. With their leader out of prison, and buoyed by their success in the August 4 municipal and city corporation elections, the Awami League is feeling very confident. Admittedly, Mujib's failures as Prime Minister and his controversial decision to institute a one-party state in 1974 remain a blot on his legacy. That said, August 15 normally produces nostalgia about his role in leading the country to independence and sympathy for the other family members brutally murdered during the coup. For its part, the BNP remains adrift, unsure about Khaleda Zia's future and undecided about whether to participate in elections. With some justification, the BNP feels that it has borne the brunt of the Caretaker Government's wrath since January 11, 2007. The BNP may not be "out," but they are certainly "down."

Moriarty